

Original Paper

University Students' Perceptions of MALL in EFL Classes

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Received: January 14, 2019 Accepted: January 31, 2019 Online Published: February 19, 2019

doi:10.22158/selt.v7n1p75 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/selt.v7n1p75>

Abstract

Mobile technologies are rapidly attracting new users, providing increasing capacity, and allowing more sophisticated use such as accessing the Internet for searching information, emailing and reading e-books. As the mobile technology has been more powerful and inclusive in people's daily lives, the issue of mobile assisted language learning (MALL) has also been widely studied. Many researchers of MALL consider the emerging mobile technologies to have potential for the effective language learning. The majority of MALL activities appear to make use of mobile phones, and nowadays, smartphones replace feature phones. This study focuses on the investigation of students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with the use of smartphones for learning.

Keywords

MALL, technology assisted language learning, smartphones

1. Introduction

Widespread ownership of mobile phones and the increasing availability of other portable and wireless devices have been changing the landscape of technology-supported learning. Use of these technologies turns out to be well aligned with strategic educational goals such as improving student retention and achievement, supporting differentiation of learning needs, and reaching learners who would not otherwise have the opportunity to participate in education (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2005). Mostly, when students arrive at university they have developed a variety of practices related to learning and the use of digital and networked technologies. Since the world that most young people grow up in is filled with new technology, it has become commonplace that this new environment impacts young people. They are known as the Net Generation (Tapscott, 2009).

The mobility has enabled learning independent of location and any time even out of classroom. However, the integration of such technologies into teaching and learning has been more gradual, as educators need to understand how they can be effectively used to support various kinds of learning (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008) and develop effective methods and materials for mobile assisted

language learning (MALL). The use of mobile phones and other portable devices is beginning to have an impact on how learning takes place in many disciplines and contexts, including language learning. Learners who are not dependent on access to fixed computers can engage in activities that relate more closely to their current surroundings, sometimes crossing the border between formal and informal learning. This creates the potential for significant change in teaching and learning practices.

MALL has been defined as the use of “mobile technologies in language learning, especially in situations where device portability offers specific advantages” (Kukulska-Hulme, 2013, 3701). MALL differs from computer assisted language learning (CALL) in its use of personal, portable devices that enable new ways of learning emphasizing continuity or spontaneity of access and interaction across different contexts of use (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). The potential of mobile devices to carry out activities for learning both inside and outside of the classroom has been widely cited as a way of making learning more accessible and to allow for more consistent learning opportunities (Stockwell & Liu, 2015).

Among all technological devices available in our era, mobile phones are the most popular ones and outnumber personal computers, and they have an important place particularly in young people’s lives (Saran, Çağıltay, & Seferoğlu, 2008). Mobile phones are very common communication devices among the university students. Almost every student of a university possesses one or more mobile phones. It is common phenomena among the teenagers (Cambell, 2006). As a result, the majority of MALL activities appear to make use of mobile phones (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008).

As smartphones replaced feature phones and mobile phone infrastructure improved, these limitations became moot and teachers began to take advantage of the increased capabilities of smartphones for learning in the EFL classroom (Oberg & Daniels, 2013). A smartphone is a mobile telephone that includes a computer-like operating system, interactive display screens, internal storage capability, the ability for text based interactions, application use, and Internet access (Wu, 2015). Moreover, the rapid development of app technologies has made English learning apps capable to integrate different media. For example, text, picture, animation, audio and video can be integrated in order to create a multimedia instructional material, as well as prompt students’ interest in studying.

Although smartphones are banned in some classrooms since faculty perceives them as intrusive items which may distract the learners from learning, they can be viewed as a learning device if the faculty knows how to incorporate mobile learning into language education. Several second language educators have introduced and reviewed the use of smartphones and its applications for EFL language learning. Lockley (2013) found that Japanese EFL students felt more familiar with smartphone technology than with personal computers. White and Mills (2014) surveyed Japanese college student attitudes toward EFL learning via smartphones and reported that student perceptions of using smartphones in MALL continue to improve. Ilic (2015) also reported that smartphones facilitated collaboration among group members in EFL classes and that students were positive about using smartphones for on-the-go studying. Stockwell and Lui (2015) conducted a replication study in language learning environment.

The purpose of the study was to determine whether or not using smartphones would have an effect on the way in which Japanese and Taiwanese EFL learners engaged in vocabulary activities, and would result in increased use of mobile phones to complete the activities compared to the initial study that was published in 2010. The results suggested that new technologies are likely to have had some effect on reducing the amount of time taken to complete activities, but this did not seem to have any particular impact on the degree to which learners used their smartphones to engage in the activities, with learners showing a gradual increase in the amount of time they used mobile devices compared with the results from the 2010 study. Wang, Iwata and Jarrell (2016) reported similar privacy concerns among their participants regarding the use of smartphones to access linked websites and register for online language learning materials. Gangaianmaran (2017) wrote a review on the use of mobile apps for language learning at the tertiary level. This review paper aimed to classify the apps in order to assist the learner of different categories in choosing the appropriate mobile app. Findings from the reviewed articles and dissertations based on mobile apps show that listening skills are better acquired than that of other skills. Toland, Mills and Kohyama (2016) examined how mobile-video could be used to enhance presentation skills through self- and peer reflective activities. The results indicated that most participants viewed mobile-video enhanced self- and peer-reflective feedback as beneficial tools that could help improve the quality of their EFL presentation performances. Suwantarathip and Orawiatnakul (2015) examined the effects of mobile-assisted vocabulary exercises on vocabulary acquisition of Thai university students. The findings revealed that mobile-assisted vocabulary exercises had a significant effect on vocabulary ability of the students. Wichadee (2017) compared how male and female Thai university students perceived mobile phones as a language learning tool, used mobile phones to learn English and developed their learning performance. The findings demonstrated that male and female students did not differ in their usage, attitudes toward mobile phone uses for language learning as well as their learning performance at a significant level.

Many of the studies discussed above have demonstrated that university students view the use of smartphones and mobile devices for EFL language learning positively and understand the benefits of using them. For Thai university students, they usually use online tools for two purposes which are solving language difficulties such as online dictionaries, machine translations, and grammar checkers and using search engines to search for contents (Wuttikrikunlaya, 2012). More importantly, Thai university students now own personal smartphones, providing more opportunities to use these devices to learn English. Because EFL teachers in universities are requiring students to use their personal smartphones for English learning activities, it has become necessary to determine how university students feel about using their personal smartphones in EFL classes. The purpose of this research was to explore Thai university student perceptions of required smartphone use in EFL classes. The study's revelations may inform higher education professors and lecturers who intend to incorporate student smartphone use in university EFL classrooms to exploit student technical resources for language learning.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 103 EFL students enrolled in TEFL 1-2 at Faculty of Education, Mahasarakham University in Thailand. Participants included 76 females and 27 males, all of the participants of the current study own a smartphone with which they could conduct MALL activities.

2.2 Research Question

Today smartphones have become a common tool in EFL classrooms. Many lecturers already incorporate the use of student smartphones into their language-learning classrooms, however, because these devices are the personal property of the students, the student perceptions of being required to use their own smartphones in language learning activities is not fully understood. Therefore, the following research question guided the study: How do students perceive the benefits and challenges of the use of their personal smartphones to complete EFL classroom activities, tasks, and assignments?

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Open-ended questions are designed to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the subject's own knowledge and/or feelings. Open-ended questions also tend to be more objective and less leading than closed-ended questions. Moreover, open-ended questions are great for getting authentic feedback because they give people a chance to describe what they're experiencing in their own voice. Therefore, this study employed open-ended questions to gather university student experiences and perceptions of using personal smartphones in their EFL courses. General open questions have some of the features of qualitative approaches: they appear to allow respondents to write whatever they want in their own words, with little structure imposed by the researcher; the output is words rather than numbers or ticks; the analysis may use techniques associated with qualitative research. Thus, a qualitative method was appropriate in this study because it allowed for the revelation of a clearer picture of the true perceptions of the participants' use of personal smartphones in their EFL classes. The researcher investigated students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with the use of smartphones for learning. The study was confined to the students majoring in English, the Faculty of Education, Mahasarakham University. Data were reviewed and coded twice by the researcher. Through the coding process, common themes emerged and were noted. The researcher then reported the themes that emerged from each question.

3. Result

3.1 Questions and Emerging Themes

Q1. Previous MALL experiences in EFL studies

All students had previous experiences:

- They used smartphones and iPad before classes start to complete assigned readings to be able to participate in class discussions.
- They used smartphones and ipads during classes such as for vocabulary; translation; practice the four

language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and grammar; and for help with pronunciation.

- They used smartphones and iPads after classes to texting about class assignments and downloading learning materials and using them to help finish assignments.

Q2. Feelings about smartphone use in English speaking courses

All students thought using a smartphone was helpful. They noted the main benefits from using their smartphones were ease and speed of access to the Internet and ready access to the information that they needed to complete the tasks that they were given during the classes.

Most students were very comfortable using their smartphones. They could find answers to any question within seconds. Using smartphones saved them a lot of time. They enjoyed using their smartphones because of easy access to the materials. They could practice any item of the language anytime anywhere.

Most students gained self-confidence. They agreed that they gained more self-confidence whenever they used smartphones to prepare themselves for class to complete assigned readings to be able to participate in class discussion. They were able to communicate well with their classmates and to answer the questions from the lecturers.

Q3. Feelings of smartphones being beneficial in EFL classes

All students considered smartphones as helpful and beneficial. They wrote that benefits of smartphones were:

- They didn't have to carry books, pen, and paper.
- They could practice the four skills of English on the same device.
- They could get the apps for free.
- They could gain knowledge and have fun with their classmates.
- They could be technologically advanced and linguistically benefited simultaneously.

However, some students were concerned about misuse of the smartphones. Learners might use them for social or personal purposes, or for cheating instead of using them for educational purposes. They suggested that lecturers should set strict guidelines, use only when the lecturers allow, for example for group work when learners need to research and for doing quizzes on Kahoot, Plicker, and Quizlet.

Q4. Trouble using smartphones in EFL class

None of the students felt that they had problems with smartphones for activities. However, some students mentioned barriers that keep the students from using their smartphones as a learning tool (e.g., low battery life, slow Internet connection).

Q5. Opinion of other lecturers having students use smartphones in EFL class

Most students agreed that other lecturers should incorporate smartphones because they felt that they were deriving educational benefit from the use of their smartphones, they especially found that the use of smartphone apps was a highly effective way to discover and learn new vocabulary as well as translate L1 to L2. They also suggested that lecturers had to develop clear policies on appropriate classroom smartphone

use to prevent misuse.

Q6. Future use of smartphones for English study

All students indicated that they would continue using smartphones because they could use different apps to access knowledge at anytime and anywhere. They considered that for a modern student, the ability to include online resources in the educational process opens opportunities for discovering the best way to study; when they install the right apps, this device can perfectly support their studies.

Q7. Classes with smartphones are more enjoyable than those without

Most students found it interesting, exciting, and fun when lecturers incorporated smartphones in the class. Nevertheless, the students wrote that it depended on the lectures' ability to incorporate smartphones effectively and in a fun manner.

Q8. Do you think EFL classes that use smartphones are more productive than those without

Most students agreed that the use of smartphones is more productive in classes than those that do not include smartphone activities because they could access authentic materials from the web that could be used immediately to inform group discussions. Other language learning resources, such as online dictionaries, were the most frequent resources that students used. In addition, a huge selection of foreign language podcasts and other resources were available for them to download and access at a convenient time and place. Some students did not agree that the use of smartphones is more productive than those that do not include smartphone activities. They argued that technology is not meant to replace the teacher, the effectiveness of technology depends upon teachers selecting appropriately and implementation of that technology to meet teaching and learning goals.

4. Discussion

All students had previous MALL experiences in EFL studies. They used smartphones and ipads before, during and after classes to support their learning. Most students found the use of smartphones for EFL activities to be beneficial, fun, and productive. However, some students were concerned about misuse of the smartphones. They suggested that lecturers should set strict guidelines. In addition, some students did not agree that the use of smartphones are more productive and enjoyable than those that do not include smartphone activities. They wrote that it depended on the lectures' ability to incorporate smartphones effectively. Most of the students indicated a desire for other university English teachers to implement MALL teaching methods using the students' smartphones. Finally, all students stated they will continue to use their smartphones to study English in the future.

Based on this study's findings, it can be inferred that lecturers can and should explore ways to effectively incorporate the students' smartphones and MALL methodologies in their classrooms. Competent, engaged lecturers are more necessary than ever in the Information Age, and balancing MALL advantage with healthy teaching is the key to success. Technologies, mobile or otherwise, can be instrumental in language instruction. They are not in and of themselves instructors; rather, they are instructional tools. And the effective use of any tool in language learning requires the thoughtful

application of second language pedagogy. Thus, university teachers should consider these findings and develop clear policies on appropriate classroom smartphone use and consequences for their misuse. In their responses to the question about opinion of other lecturers having students use smartphones in EFL classes, the students suggested that lecturers should allow them to use online dictionaries and translation apps. This is in line with the findings of Wuttikrikunlaya (2012) that Thai university students usually use online tools for solving language difficulties such as online dictionaries and machine translations. This finding also demonstrates a reversal of Suwantarathip and Orawiwatnakul's (2015) findings that mobile-assisted vocabulary exercises had a significant effect on vocabulary ability of the Thai university students. This study's findings also support the growing trend of university teachers' use of MALL instructional methods incorporating student smartphones in classroom activities. Most of the students indicated a desire for other university English teachers to implement MALL teaching methods using the students' smartphones.

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